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When All Else Fails: The Critical Role of Civil Society in Addressing Northern Ireland's Segmental Autonomy

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ABSTRACT: Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society. The education system mirrors the broader societal divisions between Catholics and Protestants and the vast majority of students experience an education that remains almost wholly segregated based on religious identification. This paper places that segregation in a political context, by analyzing how the type of political system has impacted education reform as it relates to the development of an integrated education sector. Northern Ireland provides a unique opportunity to test the impact of political systems on education reform because, over the past ninety years, the state has been governed under majoritarian home rule, direct control by an external actor, and consociational home rule. Despite the deeply segmented education system, a group of parents began a concerted push for integrated education beginning in the 1970s. Over the course of three decades, their advocacy spurred substantial reform and served as the catalyst for an integrated education sector that now serves more than five percent of elementary and secondary students. The successes and failures of that movement provide strong empirical evidence that no matter the political system in place, civil society is critical to promoting integrated education reform in deeply divided societies.

"Even if the last move did not succeed, the inner command says move again."

- Seamus Heaney

Introduction

Northern Ireland's education system has changed remarkably little over the past two hundred years. In the mid 19th century, the British government at Westminster approved the development of a national school system in Ireland intended to harmonize a disparate system of independent schools that received state funding and funneled most of it to Protestant children. Unfortunately, those reforms had little effect. The national schools quickly became fiefdoms of the respective Protestant and Catholic churches, children continued to attend schools run by their Church, and Protestant schools continued to receive preferential funding. While the funding is now equitable, that same separation remains. In contemporary Northern Ireland, 94 percent of students attend a school that is almost wholly Catholic or Protestant in its enrollment (DENI, 2012a).

Protestant children attend controlled schools run by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) and Catholic children attend maintained schools run by the Catholic Church but funded by the state. This practice is so firmly entrenched that only five percent of children in controlled schools identify as Catholic and less than one percent of children in maintained schools identify as Protestant (DENI, 2012a). However, there is a third side to this story. The remaining six percent of children in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools where the status quo is far different. These schools aspire to reach at least 40 percent enrollment of each group; maintain a diverse faculty, administration, and governorship; and commit themselves to the ideals of integration (NICIE Statement of Principles, 2009). The development of this integrated sector is a fascinating story that spans the modern history of Northern Ireland and provides unique insight into the challenges of integration under successive political systems and the important role of civil society in that process.

Literature Review & Hypothesis

Education in Northern Ireland relies heavily on a system of segmental group autonomy that seeks to maintain stability through separation. Lijphart (1977) called this concept “negative peace” in the sense that it seeks to maintain stability without attempting to overcome the underlying cause of conflict. Andreweg (2003) puts it in more colloquial terms with the saying “good fences make good neighbors” (p. 528).

The suitability of this theory’s application to deeply divided societies is contested by a substantial body of research that finds sustained intergroup contact capable of moderating intergroup hostility (see: Stringer et al., 2009). Meanwhile, less-than-optimal outcomes in segmental states as varied as Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Israel-Palestine have emboldened Lijphart’s detractors. Summarizing much of their position, Oberschall (2007) argued, “Recent history has repeatedly shown how ‘live and let live’ separatism rapidly descends into ethnic warfare in a crisis” (p. 237).

Irish civil and political leaders going back almost two centuries have expressed sentiments similar to Oberschall’s and argued for greater integration between the historically segmented Catholic and Protestant communities, particularly in regards to education. Despite the frequency of such rhetoric, progress has been slow and halting. Nonetheless, an integrated sector has developed in spite of the obstacles.

For the first fifteen years, efforts to establish integrated schools existed in a realm situated between the state and other basic building blocks of society – what Manor, Robinson & White (1999) defined as “civil society”. In the Northern Ireland context, it is best described as the realm between the Churches and the State. Since neither the Churches nor the State had an interest in surrendering control over to their respective sectors of the segmented school system, it fell to a coalition of parents to drive reform. The organization they formed – All Children Together (ACT) – was the primary driver for integrated education in the earliest stages and ACT formed the nucleus of the non-governmental, non-sectarian coalition that has pushed reform over the past forty years.

This paper hypothesizes that civil society – represented in Northern Ireland by ACT and its allies – is necessary to the successful implementation of an integration agenda in deeply divided

societies. For the period of time prior to the creation of ACT, this paper considers the null hypothesis that without a civil society committed to reform, an integrated agenda in deeply divided societies will not progress.

Research Design

Northern Ireland's political history can be divided into six phases of government (see Timeline 1) employing one of three political systems: majoritarian rule, consociational power-sharing, or direct control by an external actor. This paper treats each of the first four phases (ending in 2002) as a separate case study that the hypothesis and null hypothesis can be tested against. This method of organization provides a manageable system for analyzing eight decades of Northern Ireland's history while also accounting for the variations in political structure under which reform is being attempted. This paper draws on primary and secondary sources for data, including interviews conducted by the author, academic studies, official reports by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI), and detailed accounts of ACT, the Catholic Church, and other key players and periods in Northern Ireland's history.

Timeline 1: Political Systems

1920-1972	Majoritarian Rule
1973	Consociational Power-sharing
1974-1998	British Direct Control
1998-2002	Consociational Power-sharing
2002-2007	British Direct Control
2007	Consociational Power-sharing

Failure at Stormont 1920-1972

Northern Ireland came into being with the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which divided the island into two political entities. The 26 southern counties and their Catholic majority formed the Republic of Ireland and retained the Irish capital of Dublin. The six northern counties with their Protestant majority remained a semi-autonomous region within the United Kingdom and created a new seat of government in Belfast, with its Parliament at Stormont (McEwen, 1999). From 1920-1972, Northern Ireland was ruled under a devolved system of majoritarian government that heavily favored the Protestant population. Structural inequalities in employment, housing, and justice would remain the status quo until a Catholic civil rights movement in the 1960s erupted into violence known as "The Troubles" in the 1970s.

In deeply divided societies majoritarian systems pose a major challenge because the party in power has total control over the resources of the state and little vested interest in the rights of the minority. In Northern Ireland, this created strong vested interests on the part of both the majority and minority to maintain influence over their own education systems, which appears to have crowded out civil society. Prior to the formation of ACT in 1974, there was no dedicated non-governmental, non-sectarian effort to break down the segmented educational system. Instead, that

segmented system only strengthened during the period of majoritarian rule, confirming the null hypothesis that without a civil society committed to reform, an integrated agenda in deeply divided societies will not progress.

From 1920 to 1972, the Ulster Unionist party controlled between 62 and 76 percent of the seats at the Parliament of Stormont (Crighton & Iver, 1991). Since Stormont operated under a British system of majoritarianism during this time, the Unionists were able to “form one-party governments with no Catholic representation whatsoever” (p. 131). This heavy-handed majoritarianism had deleterious effects on the state institutions, which “appeared to express the interests of only one group in society and therefore lacked the autonomy so essential to political development” (p. 131). In laymen’s terms, this meant that the state significantly privileged Protestants to the detriment of legitimacy and, ultimately, stability.

Protestant schools received more funding, Protestant communities received better services, and – even when controlling for lower levels of education – Protestant workers received better jobs in both the public and private sectors (Hancock, 1998). As Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2004) highlight, this type of clientelism – a process where goods and services are exchanged for political support – “tends to flourish in insecure political and economic environments [...] and is integral to the politics of survival for both patrons and clients” (p. 165). It also further entrenched division because the majority, which had the power, had no incentive to change the arrangement on its own accord.

Lord Londonderry, Northern Ireland’s first Minister for Education, harbored an idyllic vision of “schools where children of different faiths might study and play together” and “denominational religious instruction only [took place] outside hours of compulsory attendance” (Bardon, 2009, p. 13). However, Londonderry’s views clashed with the political realities of a system underpinned by segmentation. He could not even find support from the commission that he convened to make suggestions for education reform. That body – the Lynn Commission – declared:

Whilst we deplore the fact that children of all denominations have not been educated together, and believe that this separation of the pupils has been productive of great injury to the community, we think that under existing conditions no attempt to amalgamate schools under Roman Catholic and Protestant management would meet with any measure of success. (Lynn Report, 1922, p. 221)

Londonderry ignored this advice and moved forward with an attempt to create inclusive schools. Although he had the initial support of his Ulster Unionist Government, he was handicapped by the absence of a civil society to support his reforms. This did not prove to be a challenge initially when his 1923 Education (Northern Ireland) Act, complete with language that restricted denominational instruction in state-managed schools, passed an unwitting Parliament. However, the bill quickly generated a firestorm of controversy with both the Protestant and Catholic churches “embittered by what they saw as the Act’s usurpation of their traditional role in education” (Irish Educational Documents, 1995, p. 34).

Capitalizing on their influence in the majoritarian system, the Protestant clerics formed the United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches and quickly set about “directly threatening the new and fragile government” (McEwen, 1999, p. 8). Without any organized group (i.e., civil

society) in a position to support Londonderry's reforms and counteract pressure from the Churches, the 1923 Act was short-lived. Northern Ireland Prime Minister James Craig withdrew his support for Londonderry's reforms, an amending bill was rushed through Parliament that rolled back his reforms, and Lord Londonderry resigned the following year (Akenson, 1973).

Timeline 2: Major Acts, Events, and Orders

1920 Government of Ireland Act
1923 Education (Northern Ireland) Act
1930 Education Act
1973 Sunningdale Agreement
1974 ACT
1978 Dunleath Act
1981 Lagan College founded
1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order
1998 Good Friday Agreement

The lack of a civil society capable of mitigating the influence of the Protestant Churches certainly hastened the failure of the 1923 Act, but that narrative only tells half the story. It is also important to understand that the Catholic Church had little intention of ceding influence over its schools and would sustain great injuries to maintain its control.

After Londonderry's departure, subsequent legislation only further separated Catholic and Protestant school children, with the 1930 Education Act "putting denominational schooling on a statutory footing" for the first time (McEwen, 1999, p. 9). The Act established tiers of schools, with the most funding going to those that acquiesced to full state control. Protestant churches were willing to cede control to the Protestant state, but that option was unacceptable to the Catholic community whose schools represented "the only major state system in their control in an otherwise hostile cultural and political environment" (McEwen, 1999, p. 10). As a result, the Catholic Church maintained control over its own schools and accepted the lower levels of funding. This was only the most egregious example of "the unionist government with its unassailable majority discriminating against Catholics in education provision" (Bardon, 2009, p. 15). However, the willingness of the Catholic Church to accept this discriminatory arrangement shows the barriers that would face the government if, acting alone, it sought to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church. In fact, in later years as the advent of a civil society dedicated to integration led to the creation of integrated schools it would be the Catholic Church and not the Protestants that would provide the fiercest opposition.

Sunset on Sunningdale 1973

In 1972 the Catholic civil rights movement that had been gaining traction over the course of the 1960s erupted into violence so severe it led the British Government to exercise its authority to suspend the Parliament of Northern Ireland and reintroduce direct control. However, negotiations

to reinstitute a power-sharing government began immediately and resulted in the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement. The Agreement created a new legislative body called the Northern Ireland Assembly that would be elected by proportional representation and then select an executive through the D'Hondt method.¹ The power-sharing executive began its work at the end of 1973, only to be struck a critical blow two months later when anti-Sunningdale leaders were elected to all but one of the Protestant districts in a Westminster general election. As a result, the opinion of Basil McIvor, the recently installed Minister of Education, was that “the time available for implementing educational change was likely to be exceedingly short” (Bardon, 2009, p. 23). The specter of an impending collapse of the Government significantly complicates interpretation of the Sunningdale government's actions during the five months before the Agreement failed on May 28, 1974. Since there was still no active civil society, this section tests for the null hypothesis in the context of consociational power-sharing.

In April of 1974, just a month before the government failed, Basil McIvor proposed to introduce a new category of “Shared Schools” that would be open to children of any religion. Despite its voluntary nature, the plan was incredibly audacious for a government whose political fortunes were in question. Nonetheless, McIvor had the unanimous support of the Northern Ireland Executive, the strong support of the Methodist Church and the Church of England, the cautious support of the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church, and the endorsements of the two principal teaching unions. Meanwhile, although the Catholic Church stated its opposition to the plan, a majority of SDLP members (the core Catholic party) indicated their willingness to explore the option (Bardon, 2009).

At its surface, this seems to indicate a surprising willingness to break down the segmented education system and – if this effort were successful – would refute the null hypothesis since ACT, our marker for civil society, was not formed until a year later. Unfortunately, the government collapsed before the rhetorical support for the Shared Schools Initiative could be put to the test, precluding a conclusive decision on the null hypothesis in this case study. However, there are several reasons why the evidence suggests that, despite the excitement this bill precipitated, the Shared Schools Plan would not have been implemented.

First, following the Westminster General Election, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive knew its time was limited, which reduced the potential cost of taking controversial stands. Second, the Churches had a history of publicly supporting integration but then failing to match their rhetoric with action. This would be seen four years later when, inspired by the ecclesiastical support for the Shared Schools Plan, a law was passed to allow the Churches to voluntarily convert their schools to integrated status and none did so. There is no reason to believe the circumstances were drastically different in 1978. Third, Assembly members were opportunistic in using debate on the Shared Schools Plan to make partisan attacks, which strained relations and likely would have fractured the already uneasy alliance if the government had not fallen shortly thereafter (Bardon, 2009). As would be seen three decades later when consociational power sharing was reinstituted, it does not take long for issues to become divisive in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

¹ The D'Hondt method is a mechanism for selecting a power-sharing executive. It functions as a form of draft, with each party allotted a number of minister appointments proportional to their representation in the Assembly. For more information see O'Leary, B., Grofman, B., & Elklit, J. (2005).

Ultimately, protests collapsed the Sunningdale government before the fate of the Shared Schools Plan could be divined, so the null hypothesis is inconclusive in this case. However, the evidence suggests that the null is valid and the effort to provide integrated schooling options would have failed even if the Sunningdale government had not. Luckily, the Shared Schools Plan inspired a wide cross-section of society, which joined the nascent ACT when it formed shortly thereafter and began agitating for change. The founding of ACT created the first civil society organization created to promote educational integration and its efforts would ultimately play a critical role.

The Era of Direct Control 1974-1998

In 1974, facing widespread civil disorder, the British Government sitting in Westminster had little choice but to dissolve the Sunningdale Agreement and reinstitute direct control as an external actor.² Rose (2001) points out that, prior to the beginnings of the Catholic Rights Movement, Northern Ireland was “given a low priority by the Labour Party in part [...] due to the absence of political unrest or violence” (p. 11). Since the presence of unrest then prompted intervention, the presumption is that Westminster’s primary concern was ensuring peace and stability. As a result, one would expect reluctance to take any action that could aggravate the situation. Palmer’s (2005) hypothesis was that external actors had the latitude to make unpopular decisions because they were not accountable to domestic interests. Although Palmer acknowledged the potential for concern about stability, he still argued that Westminster played a critical role in reform by virtue of its qualities as an external actor. This section conditions his hypothesis by highlighting that Westminster was a reluctant reformer pushed to action by civil society. With ACT now constituted and actively lobbying for reform, it is possible to test the hypothesis that civil society is necessary to the successful implementation of an integration agenda in deeply divided societies. To do that, this section argues that without civil society Westminster’s concerns about stability would have trumped its capacity to act and stymied reform.

Immediately following the introduction of direct control, British Home Secretary Callaghan took a strong position against educational segmentation. In his speech to the Labour Party Conference, he said it was “offensive that separate education is advanced as an unshakeable principle” (McGrath, 2000, p. 182). That speech set off rampant speculation about the approach Westminster would take to education reform. However, those hopeful for change had their hopes dashed by the Minister of State for Northern Ireland’s Education Portfolio, who told DENI that he was not mandated to change the laws surrounding segmentation and therefore would not take assertive action. From this early point it became clear the British leadership was not interested in pushing for transformational change out of fear such actions could incite backlash (Bardon, 2009).

ACT responded by putting pressure on the British Government to take action. During this time, the organization commissioned public opinion polls that showed widespread support for integration, encouraged the Churches to make public declarations of support for such options, and frequently referenced documents – including the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the second Vatican Council’s Declaration on

² Westminster is not a perfect external actor, but for the purposes of this analysis the categorization holds because (1) only 18 of the 650 Members of Parliament at Westminster are elected from districts in Northern Ireland, and (2) because Westminster assumed direct control after fifty years of devolved autonomy.

Christian Education – to argue that the British government and the Catholic Church had a legal obligation to support reform (McGrath, 2000).

When those efforts failed to prompt action from Westminster, ACT recruited Lord Dunleath of Ballywalter – a Northern Irish Peer – to its cause. Lord Dunleath agreed to introduce a private members bill that would create a process through which the Boards of Governors of Protestant controlled and Catholic maintained schools could voluntarily elect to transform into a new category of controlled integrated schools. Despite last minute attempts from within the British government to discourage Lord Dunleath from taking action, once his bill was introduced, it passed both houses and was amended into the Education (Northern Ireland) Act of 1978, colloquially known as “the Dunleath Act.”

Dorinda Lady Dunleath recounted this masterful strategy by ACT and how their lobbying placed considerable pressure on the British Government, which could not explicitly oppose an entirely voluntary option for integration without alienating British and international popular opinion (personal communication, July 22, 2011). Sure enough, the British Government made clear that it was not opposed to integration, even if it was still clearly determined to be a passive actor in the process. Meanwhile, the voluntary nature of the Act meant little came of it at the time, even if it was a landmark statutory development. The bill had been inspired by the public support several Churches had given McIvor’s Shared Schools Plan, but following the Dunleath Act it became clear that none of the Churches were willing to match their rhetoric with action. Although they now had statutory authority to formally integrate their schools, not a single school chose to integrate (Bardon, 2009). As a result, ACT continued to pressure the system by opening Lagan College, Northern Ireland’s first integrated school, in 1981.

The story of Lagan College aptly demonstrates the challenges that supporters of integration faced under British direct rule as well as their determination to demonstrate that Catholic and Protestant children could indeed learn together. Opposition to the school was so great that DENI refused it any form of financial aid when ACT approached the Department for assistance. As a result, a group of parents was prepared to mortgage their homes for start-up funding before the Rowntree Charitable Trust provided last minute support. In large part, Lagan College was a pioneer by proving the possibility of opening an integrated school without government aid. Nonetheless, the costs were daunting: Lagan College had to raise £750,000 to fund its first four years. During this time, ACT continued to pressure the government for assistance, which it ultimately began receiving in 1984. However, the reluctance to provide that aid – which only came after four years – is damning proof that Westminster had little interest in dispelling the view that opening an independent integrated school would be cost-prohibitive (Bardon, 2009).

Even after Lagan opened, the environment remained very difficult for new schools, and the Government did little to ameliorate the situation for at least the next several years. The implicit lack of support during the late 1980s is best illustrated by the plight of Forge Primary School, Northern Ireland’s second integrated school, which opened in 1985. A group of parents, supported by ACT, decided to open Forge Primary School when an existing school closed due to falling enrolments. As Bardon (2009) recounted, DENI first denied their request to use the Dunleath Act to transform the existing school before it closed and then insisted they purchase the property at the full asking price (without government assistance) if they wished to open an integrated school. This was similar to the situation that Lagan College had faced and was the normal, if still daunting,

status quo under British control at least until 1989. ACT took out a short-term interest-free loan from the Nuffield Foundation, bought the site, and began leasing it to the newly vested Forge Primary School. After self-funding for two years, Forge qualified for integrated status by its third year and began to receive full funding for recurrent expenses. At that point, it started the process to purchase its school site from ACT using the government's capital funds.

In a seemingly fortunate stroke of luck, the British Government issued the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order in 1989, requiring the government to begin providing active support to the integrated sector. This implied that there would be greater support for Forge as it applied for government funding to purchase its site from ACT. However, Forge's experience demonstrated another instance of the gap between rhetoric and action. The new Education Order shifted jurisdiction of integrated schools from DENI's direct authority to the control of the local Education and Library Boards, which oversaw controlled schools on a district level. Although DENI had already encumbered approximately \$200,000 to purchase Forge's school site, when the matter transferred to the Belfast Library and School Board, that entity decided it was not interested in purchasing the site ACT had bought with funds from the Nuffield Foundation, a loan that had to be repaid. Neither DENI nor the Government intervened in what subsequently proved to be a long and drawn out legal proceeding that disrupted the school, which had to move; strained relations with the Nuffield Foundation, which did not receive payment for eight years; and nearly bankrupted ACT, which had to pay £46,704 of interest on the original £110,000 loan that would have been interest-free if repaid on time (Bardon 2009).

The 1989 Education Reform Order is often referred to as a "watershed moment" in the development of integrated education because it introduced statutory support for integrated education, began government funding of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE³), and allowed new schools to qualify for recurrent funding from day one if they met the necessary criteria (Montgomery, 2002). Henceforth, Westminster was significantly more supportive of integrated education than it had been during the prior fifteen years. However, engaged observers described that support as far more passive than active, and ACT and its allies had to remain active in promoting reform. In sociologist Ken Palmer's words, the British government was still prone to "mouthing support for inclusive education, [but] never demonstrating any sustained commitment, and more often instead balancing out demands of reformers and those in favor of the status quo" (Palmer, 2005, p. 168). Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, former ranking British Civil Servant in Northern Ireland, echoed that sentiment in stating his biggest regret to be not pushing a more assertive reform agenda while the British government reserved authority to do so (personal communication, July 19, 2011).

As an external actor, Westminster was risk-averse and reluctant to support integrated schooling if it had the potential to aggravate local politics (which it always did) so it took years of dedicated action by ACT before Westminster was willing to take a more supportive approach. It was during this period of British direct control that the integrated sector evolved, and the critical role civil society played in prompting government action must be recognized. Without the work of ACT (and

³ NICIE was established in 1987 to coordinate efforts between integrated schools in Northern Ireland, support new schools, and serve as a clearinghouse for funding. NICIE ultimately absorbed ACT. For more information, see Bardon (2009).

later NICIE and the IEF⁴), legislation like the Dunleath Act could have been years coming – or never come at all – and the same could be said for the opening of integrated schools. The developments during this phase strongly confirm the hypothesis that civil society is necessary to the successful implementation of an integration agenda in a deeply divided society.

Questionable Consociationalism 1998-2002

After more than two decades of British direct rule, a settlement was finally reached that began the process of devolving power back to Northern Irish institutions. On April 10, 1998, the majority of Northern Ireland's political parties signed the Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement), vowing their "total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means" (Declaration of Support, 1998, p. 2). Although the peace accord was more inclusive and broader in scope than Sunningdale, the political institutions it created bore a number of similarities. Power was restored to the Assembly of Northern Ireland, which would be elected by proportional representation and appoint ministers using the D'Hondt system (Ibid). While this marked the beginning of a move towards greater peace and stability, there were still years of low-intensity violence and sectarianism ahead that only furthered the need for an active civil society.

The signatories to the Belfast Agreement also pledged "to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing" in order to create "a culture of tolerance at every level of society" (Ibid 23). However, Northern Ireland remains heavily segregated and has actually become more segregated over the past twenty years (Knox, 2010). In large part, this is because the consociational government shows the same unwillingness to take controversial positions as Westminster. However, there is an additional complicating factor. Andeweg (2003) suggested that under a consociational system elites were incentivized to strengthen segmentation in order to "reduce their own increased intrasegmental vulnerability that is caused by their intersegmental cooperation" (p. 528). In laymen's terms, when a deeply divided society begins to integrate it is not always in the interest of the existing elites if they begin losing support to new crosscutting groups. Collectively, these two factors – timidity and skewed incentives – have acted as a disincentive for the consociational government to instigate education reform and underscored the importance of a dedicated civil society committed to counteracting these interests.

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place on June 25, 1998, but continued violence meant the peace process remained fragile. The formation of the Executive was continually delayed over disagreements about the decommissioning of armed groups, such that a Government was not selected until November 29, 1999. That Government would rule under devolution for just under three years, until Westminster would be forced to restore direct control in October 2002 (BBC Timeline, 2006). However, during that time the Northern Ireland Assembly had total control over the education system. Most of this power was (and currently is) vested in the Northern Ireland Minister of Education, who has wide latitude over education policy once he is selected through the D'Hondt system. The Belfast Agreement does build in a consociationalist check on this authority by ensuring an opposing party leads the legislative committee tasked with oversight. However, a member of this committee was quoted to say: "It is difficult to identify one issue where the

⁴ The Integrated Ireland Fund (IEF) was founded in 1992 as an independent financial foundation that seeks to further integrated education in Northern Ireland. Information about the IEF can be found at <http://www.ief.org.uk/>.

Education Committee got the department to change or to make policy” (McKeown & Osborne, 2006, p. 135). One reason is likely that, from the beginning of devolved power, the relationship between Minister and committee has been strained (Ibid).

In 1999, Sinn Fein shocked everyone when they used their fourth pick in the D’Hondt process to select the education ministry, and then announced that Martin McGuinness – a former Regional Commander of the IRA – would serve as Minister of Education (Palmer, 2005). This led to massive protests in Protestant schools, insubordination within DENI, and conflict with the Education committee. However, without much formal authority over policy, the committee has often been known to resort to political grandstanding that only further increases tensions (N. Richardson, personal communication, July 20, 2011).

This type of “ethnic particularism” is indicative of the partisanship that has been present in the education sector since power was devolved, and it has had far reaching consequences for education reform (Gallagher, 2006). Palmer’s grim assessment is that once power was devolved, “any momentum towards integrated education was soon halted” because every issue became a cause for sectarian gridlock (Palmer, 2005, p. 195).

As a result, the consociational government shared Westminster’s propensity to be a reluctant reformer. One manifestation of this timidity was the emphases on opening transformed schools, a process that began under direct control but reached its nadir under devolution. Within the integrated sector there are two categories of schools that have not hitherto been differentiated. Grant-maintained integrated schools are those like Lagan College that are started from the ground up by interested stakeholders. Starting in the mid-1990s, these schools now qualify for recurrent operational funding as early as year one and capital grants as early as year three, if approved by DENI. Next are controlled-integrated schools. These are traditional controlled schools whose Boards of Governors elect to transform them to integrated status, which entails diversifying the leadership and enrolment draw to ensure a minimum of 30 percent minority representation.⁵ These schools continue to be funded and managed by DENI.⁶

Prior to 1996, only three of Northern Ireland’s 28 integrated schools were controlled schools that had elected to transform. However, that year, DENI engaged in a review of the integrated schooling sector and, as a result of the review, raised the viability criterion for new grant-maintained integrated schools while simultaneously making it easier for controlled schools to transform to controlled-integrated status (DENI, 2010). As a result, there has been a significant increase in controlled-integrated schools, which now represent more than one-third of the integrated sector (DENI, 2012b).

The transformation policy has been favored under both direct and consociational rule, respectively by Westminster and Stormont, because it provides an avenue through which calls for reform can be appeased without provoking backlash. Opening grant-maintained schools is inherently controversial because these new schools compete with existing controlled and

⁵ In practice, this means drawing in Catholic students since the controlled schools are majority Protestant.

⁶ In theory there is a third category of maintained-integrated schools, which would be comprised of any Catholic-maintained schools that elected to diversify their governorship and enrolment draw, while remaining under the management of the Catholic Church. However, the Catholic leadership remains opposed to this option.

maintained schools for students, generating opposition from both the Catholic and Protestant communities. By voluntarily transforming an existing controlled school into a controlled-integrated school, substantial opposition is mitigated since the number of schools remains constant.

The problem is that transformed schools often transform in an effort to stave off declining enrolments, and this has raised questions about their dedication to the mission of integration as well as their suitability relative to grant-maintained schools. The Nuffield Foundation found that transformed schools rarely meet the same standards as grant-maintained schools. That study corroborated the common assessment among stakeholders that transformed schools often lack a dedication to the precepts of contact theory, do not have strong buy-in within their community, fail to properly train their staff, and often continue to function like a normal controlled school (McGonigle, Smith & Gallagher, 2003). Placed within the context of the political system, transformation offers a number of benefits attractive to a consociational government unable to take controversial stands because of political gridlock and with a vested interest in maintaining some level of inter-group segmentation.

This is very much the argument that Ken Palmer (2005) takes when he argues, “the devolved power-sharing government established under the Good Friday Agreement lacked any commitment [to integrated education] at all” (p. 169). The integrated sector did continue to expand under the consociational system but that was very much driven by a civil society that had taken the initiative to both open new schools and transform existing ones, while providing them with technical and financial assistance. It is difficult to divine what actions the consociational government would have taken if an integrated sector had not already existed by 1999. It is unlikely that it would have taken major action. Under the current consociational system, Protestants and Catholics continue to be largely schooled separately and there has been no effort to change the status quo. Instead, by supporting transformation, the consociational government has been as conservative as possible without taking an actively opposed position. Despite the government’s impotence, supporters of integration have continued to push the standard forward, opening new schools, supporting existing ones, and ceaselessly lobbying for further reform.

Conclusion: A Role for Civil Society

In 1973, almost no students were cross-enrolled in schools outside of their denomination, yet polling found “sixty-four percent of Catholics and fifty-nine percent of Protestants supporting integration” (McGrath, 2000). In 2011, six percent of students were attending integrated schools and a poll commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund found 90 percent of the population supporting integrated education (Attitudinal Survey on Integrated Education, 2011). At the school level there are incredible success stories like Lagan College and the other sixty integrated schools now open. Yet, at the macro level, 94 percent of Northern Irish pupils still attend schools exclusive to their religious background in a society that continues to be deeply divided.

Where there have been successes, it is important to recognize the critical role played by civil society. Beginning with All Children Together (ACT), a dedicated group of parents and local citizens of both faith communities rallied around the cause of integrated education. Following the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement and its Shared Schools Plan they began actively lobbying Westminster to provide an integrated option. That led to a watershed moment when the Dunleath

Act was passed in 1978, finally establishing a de jure route for the establishment of integrated schooling. Yet, facing continued recalcitrance from both church and state, ACT opened Lagan College in 1981. Since then, ACT – and now NICIE and IEF – have supported dozens more schools. All throughout, they have placed continual pressure on the Government, be it Westminster or the Northern Ireland Assembly. Despite the challenges of the 1990s and the partisanship of the 2000s, supporters of integrated education have continued to open schools and support them, even if the government has been far from supportive. The history of ACT from 1974 onwards strongly confirms the hypothesis that civil society is necessary to the successful implementation of an integration agenda in deeply divided societies.

It is also important to recognize the validity of the null hypothesis that without a civil society committed to reform, an integrated agenda in deeply divided societies will not progress. The best efforts of Lord Londonderry in the 1920s and Basil McIvor in 1973 failed to lead to an integrated option. In both cases, there was not a group dedicated to supporting their policies and counteracting the opposition, or simply acting outside the political system and opening their own schools – as ACT did initially with Lagan College and Forge Primary.

Civil society's successes must be qualified so long as there is a substantial gap between the stated support of the general population for integrated schooling and the actual numbers of enrolled students. However, without civil society it is unlikely the integrated sector would exist at the scale it does today, if it would even exist at all. This has important policy implications for any deeply divided society. Regardless of the political system in place, the lesson of Northern Ireland is that civil society's dedication to fostering peace cannot be underestimated.

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